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December 7 Embassy Demonstration Update

Produced by Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (AKSI)

40 Indonesian leaders and members of the Peoples Democratic Union (Persatuan Rakyat Demokratik - PRD) joined 60 East Timorese in sit-ins on the Dutch and Russian embassies on December 7. This dramatic action signals the start of a movement in Indonesia amongst Indonesians demanding that the Suharto government withdraw from East Timor. It also signals an escalation in the militancy of the democratic movement in Indonesia generally.

Support for the East Timorese cause in Indonesia has been slowly increasing over the several years, especially since the 1991 Dili massacre. This has been reflected in the outspokenness of academic critics such as Dr George Aditjondro as well as critical stances taken by a number of community and human rights organisations. For at least two years now, there has existed a Joint Committee on East Timor bringing together a range of community organisations. The Embassy occupations by the Peoples Democratic Union, however, are the first real open acts of defiance by a pro-democracy group. The actions have put its demands of Indonesian withdrawal of all police and military forces from East Timor and for a referendum on independence into the Indonesian media and over the cable TV broadcasts into Indonesia.

Moreover, the Peoples Democratic Union itself represents a new trend in Indonesian politics. It is an organisation that brings together organised support amongst trade unionists, students, farmers and artists. For the last 20 years opposition to the Suharto government has been restricted to the campuses and to dissatisfied former elements of the government. Some of these people later formed community based welfare and human rights groups but none attempted to organise broad memberships in ongoing campaigns against government policy. The formation of PRD in May, 1994 marked the beginning of a new stage in Indonesian politics. It immediately took the lead in pushing forward the public campaign against last year's bannings of Indonesia's three major newsweeklies, *Tempo*, *DeTik* and *Editor*.

Yesterday (Monday 11 December), the PRD launched another action in the form of a strike and rally of over 12,000 textile workers in the Central Javanese city of Solo. The rally was dispersed with at least 40 people arrested. The action will be supported by the PRD's national affiliates, the Indonesian Centre for Labour Struggles and Students in Solidarity with Democracy. This follows a string of other actions, including a six day strike, a demonstration and march of 14,000 workers in July just outside Jakarta..

The emergence of PRD and its willingness to support East Timorese independence is part of a deeper process of change in Indonesian society. Numerous political parties, trade unions and other organisations developed deep roots in Indonesian society beginning in the 1920s. After independence in 1945, Indonesia experienced a period of 20 years of dynamic, sometimes volatile, political pluralism. In the 1960s this gave rise to big conflicts over issues such as land for the millions of landless peasants and the role of foreign business. In 1965 these conflicts came to a head and the Indonesian military, under general Suharto, seized power. Almost all of the long standing political parties, trade unions, farmer organisations were either physically suppressed or taken over by the government, depending on how radical they were.

However, the political outlooks that these organisations represented - from left to right - remained deeply rooted in Indonesian society. They were the organisations that fought Dutch colonialism and created the Indonesian nation. Today they are beginning to force themselves back into the mainstream. Apart from the emergence of the PRD, there has been the inability of the government to stop the gradual rise of radical Sukarnoism. Megawati Sukarno is now the president of the Indonesian Democrat Party, some of whose members have already publicly endorsed the PRD's campaign for a repeal of all repressive political laws, including those banning new political parties. In the last three weeks, leaders of several of other supposedly extinct political groups have announced their reformation, using different names but the same acronyms.

All these trends are, of course, facing severe repression by the government. Leaders of PRD are regularly detained and their activities harassed. Although all the protesters from last weeks Dutch and Russian Embassy protests have been released from police custody, it is reliably reported that military and police agents are attempting to round up as many East Timorese activists as they can find. However, it will be increasingly difficult for the government to hold back the process of Indonesia's pluralistic political traditions reemerging. Widespread discontent with massive gaps between rich and poor and the absence of basic democratic freedoms is forcing many young people to seek out vehicles for expressing their discontent. This is especially the case amongst the literally millions of young people who have flooded into the country's sprawling industrial areas working for $2 a day in semi-militarised factory conditions.

The recent Embassy protests reveals the potential for discontent on these issues to link up with concerns about government policy on East Timor. The Suharto government therefore faces the prospect of not only dealing with increasing opposition to its invasion of East Timor in the international community and in East Timor. It now faces a new battle front on East Timor - in Indonesia itself, amongst its own discontented people. The actions in Jakarta over the last few days do not signal an immediate threat to Suharto's rule, but do indicate that things will not be so easy for him and his government in the months ahead.

These developments also expose the bankruptcy of the Australian government's policy on East Timor. Behind assurances that Canberra takes up human rights issues with Jakarta is the fact that Foreign Minister Evans has made it clear again and again that in his view the annexation of East Timor by Indonesia is "irrevocable." Now he needs to address this not only to the East Timorese and their Australian supporters but also to the most active section of the democratic movement in Indonesia itself. In this respect, the Australian government is more and more revealed as an ally of the Suharto government vis-a-vis the democratic opposition in Indonesia.

As the old dynamic, pluralist Indonesia starts to re-emerge in a new 1990s version, with demands for democratic change and withdrawal from East Timor at centre stage, it will become clearer and clearer that independence for East Timor is inevitable. It is only a question of time and the cost in human life and suffering. Current Australian government policy by supporting Jakarta only prolongs the suffering.

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